

Impaired Veterinarian Program Established

By: George Brenner, LCSW, LMFT, ICAC I, Continuing The Care

It is estimated that one sixth of the population will have a significant problem with alcohol and other drug use or both sometime in their lifetime excluding nicotine. Approximately one in four families will be affected by addiction. We see the problem every day in our culture, communities, social networks, patients, colleagues, families, and possibly ourselves. The rate of substance use disorders among veterinarians as a professional group is comparable to other high stress occupations. Solo practice, access to mood altering substances, compassion fatigue, etc. are more specific risk factors for veterinarians, and these along with others will be explored in future articles. We can also see the progression of these disorders at any phase in life. We have knowledge of the health consequences related to substance abuse such as liver disease, heart disease, cancers, dental problems, etc. Premature health problems remain the number one consequence of addictive disorders particularly amongst those who still appear "functional".

I would like to introduce you to [Continuing the Care: A Recovery Monitoring Program](#). In April 2009 the Indiana Veterinary Medical Association contracted "Continuing the Care" to operate the Veterinarian Well-Being Program. Candace Backer, LCSW, MAC, the Clinical Coordinator, and George Brenner, LCSW, LMFT, ICAC I, have over 64 years of combined experience treating addictive disorders and mental illness. The Program is based on a proven, effective national model for working with impaired medical professionals. This program is an important member benefit for IVMA members.

In the last 15 years, neuroscience has significantly advanced our knowledge of the most important organ of the body associated with dependence and abuse of alcohol and other drugs -- the brain. Science teaches us addiction is a brain disorder, and more specifically, a mid-brain disorder. Repeated use of alcohol and other drugs can change how the brain works. We can also begin to understand the genetic vulnerabilities that explain how approximately half the persons who become addicted were at genetic risk.

Other than health, one of the devastating consequences of the compulsive use of alcohol and other substances by veterinarians is the interference in the ability to achieve desired goals in life. If you ask those who are addicted what they would like to achieve in life, their responses would be similar to those who are not addicted. As a mid-brain disorder, substance abuse and dependence has the ability to interfere with the executive processes of the brain that enables us to achieve these goals. Dr. Andrew Chambers with the Department of Psychiatry in the Indiana University School of Medicine refers to this as "Motivational Injury". On a practical level, it is this impairment that leads to the person having difficulty in their business practices,

financial hardship, higher rates of relationship problems including divorce, distance from other family members, guilt/shame related to their actions, emotional/behavioral problems, legal problems, etc. This is often how we recognize the illness in ourselves and others. Because of this mid-brain's impaired judgments, others often recognize the disorder before the individual themselves, including office staff, colleagues, customers, and significant others.

Knowledge of the brain helps us better understand the nature of continued/compulsive use of these substances in spite of these consequences. We can better understand the lapses back to using substances whether daily or binge use following attempts to quit on our own or following a course of treatment. Like any other chronic illness, treatment works and is more effective over time. Dr. Alan Leshner, the former head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, states "The task of treatment is not to change the brain back", but to help the individual compensate for the brain changes created by addiction. The biological/psychological/ social and, some would add, spiritual treatment, for addiction helps to establish skills to avoid use of alcohol and other drugs, while helping to restore the priorities and goals of the individual and their loved ones. Like other chronic illness', treatment often starts during an acute phase requiring intensive treatment. This is often followed by a continuing treatment phase at a less intensive level.

This Program can assist the veterinarian in helping determine if they have an addictive disorder or if a colleague might be impaired. Indiana code enacted in July of 2008 requires the reporting of knowledge of a colleague who is practicing in an impaired fashion. This same code allows the reporting of a colleague and/or a self report to remain confidential as long as the practitioner complies with and benefits from the course of treatment. It can assist the individual in assessing the most appropriate care with an established knowledge of national and state providers with experience in treating impaired professionals. It will be able to establish a monitoring contract throughout the recovery process that research has demonstrated improves outcomes. And when needed, Continuing the Care will advocate for the professional to help maintain their veterinary license.

This program is here to help all veterinarians in Indiana. For more information, please leave a message on the confidential voice mail 317-627-0290 or confidential email at veterinarywellbeing@invma.org.